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The Four Women in St. Matthew's Genealogy of Christ

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RECENT discussion of the Virgin Birth has renewed interest in the genealogies of Christ; and one of the questions that have been reopened is the significance of the exceptional mention of the four women in Matthew's genealogy. Zahn, for example, in his *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew* has advocated the view suggested by earlier writers that the aim of the reference to these women is to connect their history with an attack on the Virgin Birth that had been made even before the composition of our First Gospel. As his view has largely influenced the most recent and representative British, French, and German discussions, it seems worth while to examine it critically; and if it should appear not to be tenable, to suggest another theory.

The fundamental questions are whether the mention of the women is made with a dogmatic interest of the Evangelist in Christ's salvation of sinners; or with an apologetic interest in defending the Virgin Birth; or with an apologetic interest in a mere general problem of the Apostolic Age, revealed in a general tendency of his gospel as a whole. Ordinarily the purpose of the Evangelist is made uncertain by confusing these distinct aims; and the confusion is occasioned by the several characters and histories of the four ancestresses.

The Church fathers generalizing from the sinful character of some of the women named are most frequently interested in allegorizing as to the appropriateness of the Saviour of

sinner descending from sinners. Origen in his 28th homily on Luke,¹ preserved in Jerome's translation, supports this view by the statement that all the women referred to were sinners censured by Scripture. Chrysostom in his first three homilies on Matthew based various practical applications on the sinfulness of the group.² And Jerome in his Matthew commentary bequeaths the view to Western writers in the definite statement:³ "Notandum in genealogia Salvatoris nullam sanctarum assumi mulierum sed eas quas scriptura reprehendit; ut qui propter peccatores venerat, de peccatoribus nascens, omnium peccata deleat." Nicolaus de Lyra in the fourteenth century made a spirited denial of Jerome's view of the Evangelist's interest in the sinful character of these women.⁴ But even in the early patristic period, Ambrose in his exposition of Luke 3 recognizes that this view finds its chief support in the reference to sinful Bathsheba. To him the mention of Ruth points to the Evangelist's interest in the admission of Gentiles into the Church of the Messiah descended from a Gentile. For Ruth though a Gentile was pious and chaste. Tamar did not seek satisfaction of lust, but yearned for the privilege of succession.⁵ Rahab had already been pronounced just by James the Just and by the Epistle to the Hebrews.

This New Testament praise of Rahab is in accord with the Old Testament view not only of her, but of Ruth as well. If now it can be shown that the Old Testament presents Tamar also in an honorable light, it will be unreasonable to suppose that the Evangelist would introduce as the historic type of sinners a group of women of whom three-fourths enjoy Old Testament approbation.

The real animus and spirit of the Genesis account of Tamar has been reproduced most fully and with singular animation by Gunkel. Delitzsch indeed had already said of her:⁶ "In all her errors, she was through her wisdom, ten-

¹ Migne, *P.G.*, 13. 1873.

² *P.G.*, 57.

³ Vallarsi ed. 7 a.

⁴ *Postillae*, 1508, fol. 6.

⁵ *P.L.*, 15. 1678 ff. Quoted in Schanz, *Ev. Mts.*, p. 70.

⁶ *New Cty. on Genesis*, ii. p. 276.

derness, and noble-mindedness a saint according to the Old Testament standard." Gunkel,⁷ while not agreeing with Benzinger and Nowack in their view that Tamar had a rightful claim for maternity from her dead husband's father, insists in opposition to Reuss, Kautzsch, and Wellhausen, that her act was not incest according to the view of antiquity, by reason of the necessity of her situation. And in this he is supported by Holzinger;⁸ both of them emphasizing Judah's justification of her act. Gunkel definitely interprets the Old Testament narrative as honoring her courage and energy. Overcoming the common prejudice, she does the utmost that an honorable woman can do: places her honor and her life in jeopardy; and yet disposes everything so prudently as a true ancestress in Judah, that the dangerous path leads to a happy goal, even her vindication by Judah and her renown in Israel as witnessed by the benediction on Ruth in Ruth 4 12.

That this honorable view of Tamar, which the twentieth century critic obtains from the direct statements and clear animus of the Genesis section, would naturally be the Evangelist's interpretation of the Old Testament record, is further attested by the Jewish traditions, be it of praise or of extenuation of the character not only of Tamar but also of the other women in the group. From the numerous collections of these traditions, it is enough to recall concerning Tamar that David could boast of this ancestress as being not of a tainted family, but as daughter of Shem, a priest; as being so modest that she was veiled even in her home, whence Judah's failure to recognize her; as boasting when pregnant that she would be the mother of kings and of a redeemer. E. A. Abbott⁹ refers to the definite vindication of Tamar in the Targum of Jonathan on the Genesis narrative: "The Bath Kol fell from heaven and said, From before me was this thing done, and let both be delivered from judgment." He quotes also from the *Jewish Encyclopædia*,

⁷ Nowack's *HKzAT*, "Genesis," 1902, pp. 365-370.

⁸ Marti's *KHKzAT*, "Genesis," 1898, p. 230.

⁹ *From Letter to Spirit*, p. 147, text, p. 421.

ii. 589 b: "At three Courts of Justice the Holy Spirit beamed forth; at the courts of Shem, of Samuel, and of Solomon. At the first a Bat Kol cried, She, Tamar, hath been more righteous than I."

In praise of Rahab and of her honorable standing in Israel are the assertions that the Holy Ghost rested upon her even before the entrance of the Israelites into Canaan; that she had a *fides specialis*, unique in that she regarded Jahveh as God not only in the visible earth, but infinitely more—as God in the invisible and unknown Heaven; that from her descended ten priests and prophets, including Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hulda; and that by her merit, in case two hundred members of her family were married with two hundred members of different families, all would be saved. It is needless to quote the rabbinical echoes of the praise of the personal character of Ruth already given in the Book of Ruth. Even Bathsheba is not held up to condemnation. The *Jewish Encyclopædia* quotes the passages in which the rabbis gloss her crime: "She was destined from creation to be the wife of David; and the marriage relation was immaturely precipitated by the wile of Satan."

There is therefore reason to believe that the Evangelist, even confining himself to the Old Testament record itself, would find in it and would adopt from it an honorable view of the character of three of the four women. Even of Bathsheba he could find no word of condemnation in the Old Testament after David's pardon and the death of the child of her shame. Evidently he cannot be interested, or primarily interested, in these women with such favorable Old Testament notice, as being representative sinners. Nor had he any need to seek in them the types of sin, since a selection from the genealogical line of the men would equally or better serve such a purpose.

Dismissing therefore the ancient theory that the four women are meant to be types of sin, we meet next with the view largely held since the Reformation, that they are the types of Mary. Generalizing from the fact that each became a mother in the Messianic line in an extraordinary and

utterly unanticipated manner, such maternity is regarded as related in the Evangelist's view to the Virgin Mary's supernatural maternity. Not only De Wette, but Meyer, B. Weiss, Holtzmann, Burkitt, and Loisy, continue with various qualifications this so-called Protestant tradition. This theory rests upon the large assumption not only that the Evangelist himself believed that the Virgin Birth was prefigured by the unusual motherhood of the four women, but also that he believed that the readers of his gospel would be prepared by the initial surprises of the genealogy to accept the miracle at its close. This last assumption is contrary both to the possibilities of the case and to the writer's directness of literary method and to his apologetic skill, which are strikingly summarized by Nicolardot,¹⁰ who even compares him with Taine. There is no indication that any one, Jew or Gentile, in the Apostolic Age or since, was prepared, or could be prepared, for belief in the Virgin Birth by such a cryptic and illogical suggestion. In both Infancy narratives the Virgin Birth is brought into relation with various Old Testament facts, but with nothing of this typi Mariæ order. Nor could it be. Weiss' exposition, with no justification, ascribes to the Evangelist an argumentative comparison which issues in an utter *non sequitur* and self-contradiction. For on the types-of-Mary theories, there are only three possible points of comparison between the wedded mothers in David's line and the virgin mother of David's son—extraordinary admission to the line of ancestry, the personal character of the ancestresses, or the mode of maternity.

Weiss sees the comparison in the first point. In editing the Meyer commentary he retains the statement of Meyer: "In accordance with the whole design of the genealogy which was to issue in him who was wonderfully born of a woman, the four women had entered by an extraordinary mode into the vocation to continue the line of descent of the coming Messiah, and they thereby appeared to the Evangelist as types

¹⁰ *Les Procédés de Rédaction des Trois Premiers Évangélistes*, pp. 112, 113.

of Mary."¹¹ But there is simply no comparison in this point of their extraordinary admission into Messiah's line of descent, with the New Testament view of Mary. She was not introduced into that line by any special divine interposition, as in the case of Rahab or Ruth; or by any divine overruling of human acts, as in the case of Tamar and Bathsheba. She was born in that line. In the New Testament there is *prima facie* no other suggestion or implication than that Christ was *kata sarka* of the seed of David, legally and physically, which involves the New Testament assumption of the Davidic lineage of his mother as well as of Joseph. The four women originally outside the line of descent cannot therefore be to the Evangelist types of Mary who did not need to be extraordinarily introduced into that line.

Equally impossible is it that in personal character the four women could be typical of Mary whom Christ's Church and the New Testament regard as a pure Jewish Virgin, since one of the four was a heathen who dangerously risked her chastity; another had boldly encouraged the father of her twins to intended fornication and almost to constructive incest; the third had been a harlot; and the fourth an adulteress. At most the strange choice of the four might point to the choice of a lowly and unknown mother of Messiah, but not to a virgin mother, which according to this theory is the one thing to be proved typologically. There is further a sheer impossibility of comparison between them and Mary in the third and crucial point of the mode of maternity. A virgin mother could not be typified by any of the four, who all became mothers in natural wedlock, and not one of whom was a virgin even when entering upon marriage relations with the fathers of their children. As

¹¹ Meyer-Weiss, 7th ed., 1883. In his own *Matthäusevangelium*, 1876, p. 75, he states: "Nicht bloss ihre Celebrität also oder gar ihre Sündhaftigkeit ist es, welche diesen Frauen ihre ausdrückliche Erwähnung im Stammbaum verschafft hat, sondern lediglich die Thatsache, dass sie alle auf ausserordentlichen Wegen zu Stammmüttern des Messias und so zu Vorbildern der Maria wurden, die gleichfalls nur durch wunderbare Gottesfügung die Gattin des Joseph und die Mutter des Messias ward (Vgl. v. 20. 21)."

the assumed typology thus fails to serve the Evangelist's alleged purpose, and contradicts his known views and purpose, the types-of-Mary theory must also be abandoned.

Wetstein in 1751 broke away from these theories of types of sin and types of Mary, and in modern spirit correlated the mention of the four women with the facts and problems of the Apostolic Age. Until recently his view seems to have received scant attention, probably owing in large measure to his clear terse statement of it, which at once reveals the improbability that the Evangelist could have used an argument so offensive both to Christian delicacy of feeling and to logical method and consistency. He claimed that the four are named not to prepare men to believe in the Virgin Birth, but to meet a contemporary Jewish objection to it.¹² Matthew in the method of an accurate disputant decided to remove Ebionite suspicions of a natural birth and Jewish suspicions of an illegitimate birth by the statement of Christ's miraculous birth in 1 18-25; and then by means of 1 3-17 to show that they who would not abandon such suspicions were unreasonable in opposing Christ himself and his teaching. "For if no stain attached to the offspring of the four sinful women, what is more unjust than to burden with suspicions him to whom they in nowise belong. What cavil can they make against a virgin mother who boast in the four women numbered in the line of Messianic descent? If they excuse open crimes, why are they so prone to empty suspicions, unless they are led by partisan feelings? Why imitate Doeg and Samael, and why not prefer to abstain from false accusations?"

It is substantially this theory which has been revived by Zahn, and which through his advocacy has received favorable notice or adoption, *e.g.* by Allen in *ICC*, p. 7, and in the *Expository Times*, 1911, pp. 349 ff.; by Nicolardot, *Procédés*, etc., p. 21; by E. Klostermann in Lietzmann's *Hbuch. zNT*, ii. 152; and by J. Weiss, *Die Schriften des N.T.*, p. 234. Through such channels its increasing general or popular influence is assured. Zahn's special interest in the

¹² *Nov. Test.*, 1, pp. 226, 227.

theory is its indication of a very early Christian teaching as to the Virgin Birth. Assuming on Zahn's view that Matthew was originally composed about 62, it is held that his sharply pointed apologetic and polemical opening genealogical section implies a well-known Jewish attack on a still earlier current teaching of the Virgin Birth. He and Wetstein are no doubt right in inferring that the exceptional reference to the women has a direct apologetic intention; and are also right in holding that this reference is related to a crucial question in the early Apostolic Age.

But it may be denied that this question is an attack on the Virgin Birth. Principally because Matthew's reference cannot possibly be any answer to such attack, and therefore he cannot in fairness and justice reasonably be held to refer to it. Zahn argues: objectors who assert without grounds that Jesus is illegitimate, and cannot therefore be the promised son of David, should reflect that great stains are found in the Davidic line, which are not groundless slanders, but are attested by the Old Testament. If these dark spots in David's lineage cannot absolve the objectors from recognizing in that lineage a divinely guided holy history, nor absolve them from exertion to understand its dark points, so is it their duty not to refuse on account of hateful slanders against Jesus' origin a willing ear to the presentation of the true state of the facts. The *skandala* in the genealogy prepare for the *skandalon* which the Jews found in the conception and birth of Christ.¹³

This is but a repetition of Wetstein. Indeed, it is but a repetition of the types-of-Mary theory already criticised. Deniers of the miraculous birth are expected to become believers in it by dwelling on the swift allusions to non-virgin births from four women more or less stained in character, or standing originally outside of Israel and of the regular Messianic line. But what right have we to ascribe to the Evangelist the aim of expecting to win opponents by such pointless reasoning which really subverts his own purpose and his own faith?

¹³ *Ev. d. Matth.*, p. 64.

The theory fails also in assuming that the section is addressed to opponents of the gospel. *Apologia* the First Gospel assuredly is; but not primarily to the Jews.¹⁴ Like every book of the New Testament it is addressed to the faithful; and specially like all the gospels, it is for the defense and confirmation and establishment of those who are already believers, that they may know the certainty of the things in which they have been instructed, and believing may have life. In the matter under discussion, the mention of the four women has no reference to Virgin Birth, nor is it addressed to deniers of it. The *apologia* of the Virgin Birth is given in the succeeding section, and was directly addressed to believers who accept the apostolic witness to it, which rests on the claim of one woman, the tradition of the angelic annunciation, the illumination of Old Testament prophecy, and on all the supporting considerations connected with the person and work of Christ. Without question the Apostolic Church was devoutly interested in winning opponents to her faith, and was zealous to use all available resources of argument and persuasion. But against the Zahn-Wetstein theory it is to be maintained that the apologetic interest of the First Gospel cannot be strained so as to transform the gospel into a polemic against objectors to whom it is not directly addressed, especially here where objectors to the Virgin Birth are not in his thought, and who therefore could not be expected to find anything relevant or subversive of their objections in his reference to the four women.

If then the Evangelist has not introduced the women as types of sinners or of Mary, or as Old Testament difficulties whose solution will in some way remove difficulties in believing in the miraculous birth of Jesus, there remains the theory here briefly advocated that he has selected all four on account of their heathen origin or associations, and that he means to utilize their incorporation into Israel and their direct connection with the Messianic hope in the solution of

¹⁴ Cp. Jülicher in Hauck, *PRE*, 12, p. 437.

one of the most pressing practical problems of the Apostolic Age—the admission of the Gentiles into the Church.

Special features of this theory have frequently been separately adopted, as when Ambrose, and many since, see in Ruth the type of the call of the Gentiles into the Church; and as Nicolaus de Lyra and Bengel recognize that the common characteristic of the whole group is that all were by *casu quodam singulari* joined to the descendants and heirs of Abraham. Von Soden, too, in his article on the genealogies of Jesus in the *Enc. Biblica* suggests that the interest of Christians in Ruth and Rahab is due to the fact that they were heathen. A. Lapipe most definitely argues that the extraordinary mode by which the four were joined to their husbands is a type of the novel vocation of a church from among the Gentiles. But ordinarily there is failure to connect all four with heathenism. Oftener there is, as with Grotius, a confusing mixture of this theory with the theories of types of sin and of Mary, and seldom has been recognized the Evangelist's apologetic aim in bringing the history of the four into direct relation with the movements of the Apostolic Age.

It may then be maintained that the Evangelist was interested in all the group on account of their connection with heathenism. In addition to Ruth and Rahab, he likewise presumably regarded Tamar as a heathen, a Canaanite. Apart from modern writers who deem her a heathen either in connection with their eponymous theory of Gen. 38 or with their Astral religion theory, representative writers in all schools of criticism find in this chapter indications that she was a Canaanite: Delitzsch and Gunkel in their commentaries, and Curtis in *HBD*, ii. 125 *b*; Driver stating that she is presumably a Canaanite, and Skinner's discussion also implying that she was such. What is so evident to these scholars on reading the Old Testament page was in all probability equally evident to the Evangelist. He may possibly know also the Jewish tradition of David being taunted with descent from Tamar and Ruth, which implies the heathenism of both. The one piece of contrary evidence really points

to Tamar's heathenism. For the assertion in the Jubilees¹⁵ and Testaments of the XII Patriarchs,¹⁶ that she was an Aramean, is a sheer invention that was found to be necessary by the Pharisaic authors in the period of intense Jewish particularism, in order to foster their doctrine of the duty of separation from all Gentile relations.

If, then, three of the women are regarded as Gentiles, there is some antecedent probability that Bathsheba was grouped with them in the Evangelist's view either of her Gentile origin or association. Passing over, however, occasional claims of Old Testament indications that she was a foreign woman, the Evangelist's avoidance of her name, and instead of it his description of her as the wife of Uriah, *i.e.* the Hittite, associates her in any case with a man of heathen blood, and in view of this association he may not unreasonably have grouped her with the three women who were undoubtedly heathen.

If this view of their heathenism merits consideration, then their unexpected admission to Israel's highest privileges admirably serves the writer's recognized purpose in advocating the universalism of the gospel, or, to adopt Allen's suggestive sub-title for our Matthew, in showing the gospel to be "the power of God unto salvation—to the Jew first and also to the Greek."¹⁷ It is not strange that he should begin the realization of this purpose in the opening verses of his genealogy, when we find that the genealogy and birth are followed by the homage of the heathen Magi and by the return from Egypt to half-heathen Galilee; that he records the Baptist's declaration of God's ability to raise up descendants of Abraham from the stones of the Jordan; and so on and on from Christ's praise of the faith of the heathen cen-

¹⁵ 41. 1.

¹⁶ *Judah*, 10.

¹⁷ Cp. Nicolardot, p. 112: "Son regard se meut, à l'aise, des lointains mosaïques à la conclusion des temps; des bourgades de Galilée jusqu'aux bornes du monde. Il n'a pas inventé l'universalisme chrétien, mais il l'a aimé et compris. Il l'a justifié même, par tout son œuvre, en montrant, dans l'apostolat de toutes les nations, l'expansion nécessaire d'un mouvement libérateur, que la Judée, trop étroite, trop fermée, ne pouvait désormais capter ni contenir."

tution and of the Syro-phœnician woman, and his prophecy of the many from the east and west reclining with the patriarchs in the kingdom, and his favorable declarations concerning heathen Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon and Nineveh, as contrasted with the Jewish cities of his own time; and from the closing parables of the extension of the kingdom beyond Israel to the climax in the commission to make disciples of all nations.

This theory of our Matthew's advocacy of universalism by pointing to the history of the four Old Testament women might be further supported by a detailed comparison in the rest of the New Testament of the related methods of treating the subject; of the similar lines of reasoning; and in some cases of the very close parallels of illustration. The universalism of Rom. 9-11 likewise begins with a genealogical reference. In the first generation of descent from Abraham even the line of direct inheritance is shown to be not according to flesh; and in the second generation is seen to be not according to works, but according to the free election of God who calls both Jews and Gentiles in fulfillment of the very bold Old Testament predictions of heathen admission and engrafting into God's Israel. We have also in James and Hebrews the similar use of the history of Abraham and of Rahab to express the truth of the equal justification of the Father of the Faithful and of the Gentile sinner. A complete comparative study of all the New Testament treatment of the topics of Gentile admission into the kingdom would enable us to discriminate with considerable accuracy both the definite stages of their admission, and also of the historic and logical development of the relevant New Testament teaching. The result of such study would clearly contribute to the dating of several New Testament writings. Even the character of the Evangelist's reference to the women, on the view advocated, might be a factor in determining the stage of universalism represented in our First Gospel, and thereby contribute to the discussion of its early date recently advocated by Harnack and Allen.

The theory proposed must at present be submitted with-

out this detailed discussion, but with the closing reminder that in its favor is the fact that it includes and organizes the elements of truth in the other theories. These Old Testament instances of Gentile incorporation are sinners or idolaters in so far as being Gentiles they are stained with what to the Jews are the characteristic and representative sins of the Gentiles. They have become sharers in the Messianic hope, not as types of Mary, but as historic instances of God's eternal purpose to call all nations. They are *skandala* in the Old Testament history, not as types of the *skandalon* of the Virgin Birth, but as illuminations of what at first was the *skandalon* of Gentile admission to the Church, but was at length seen to be the mystery of the gospel—that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, concorporate and co-sharers of the promise in Christ Jesus by the gospel.